

In the United States Court of Federal Claims
OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS
No. 21-0403V

JEAN M. NUNES,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: June 28, 2024

Rhonda Lorenz-Pignato, Shannon Law Group, PC, Woodridge, IL, for Petitioner.

*Benjamin Patrick Warder, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for
Respondent.*

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On January 8, 2021, Jean M. Nunes filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, *et seq.*² (the "Vaccine Act"). Petitioner alleged that she suffered a shoulder injury related to vaccine administration as a result of an influenza vaccine she received on September 25, 2020, in her left shoulder. Petition, ECF No. 1. On March 20, 2024, I issued a decision awarding compensation to Petitioner based on the parties' stipulation. ECF No. 44.

¹Because this Decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action taken in this case, it must be made publicly accessible and will be posted on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc>, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2018) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), Petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all section references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2018).

Petitioner has now filed a motion for attorney's fees and costs, requesting an award of \$43,150.15 (representing \$42,418.00 in fees plus \$732.15 in costs). Application for Attorneys' Fees and Costs ("Motion") filed April 12, 2024, ECF No. 49. Furthermore, Petitioner filed a signed statement representing that Petitioner incurred no personal out-of-pocket expenses. ECF No. 48.

Respondent reacted to the motion on April 25, 2024, indicating that he is satisfied the statutory requirements for an award of attorneys' fees and costs are met in this case but deferring resolution of the amount to be awarded to my discretion. Motion at 2-3, ECF No. 51. Petitioner then stated that she does not intend to file any substantive reply to Respondent's response. ECF No. 52 at 1.

I have reviewed the billing records submitted with Petitioner's requests and find a reduction in the amount of fees to be awarded appropriate, for the reasons listed below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Counsel must submit fee requests that include contemporaneous and specific billing records indicating the service performed, the number of hours expended on the service, and the name of the person performing the service. See *Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316-18 (2008). Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). It is "well within the special master's discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done." *Id.* at 1522. Furthermore, the special master may reduce a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing a petitioner notice and opportunity to respond. See *Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

The petitioner "bears the burden of establishing the hours expended, the rates charged, and the expenses incurred." *Wasson v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1991). The Petitioner "should present adequate proof [of the attorney's fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Wasson*, 24 Cl. Ct. at 484 n.1. Petitioner's counsel "should make a good faith effort to exclude from a fee request hours that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary, just as a lawyer in private

practice ethically is obligated to exclude such hours from his fee submission.” *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 434.

ATTORNEY FEES

The hourly rates requested for all attorneys and paralegals that performed work performed in this matter, through the end of 2023, are reasonable and consistent with our prior determinations and shall therefore be adopted herein.

However, for time billed in 2024, Attorney Rhonda Lorenz-Pignato was previously awarded the rate of \$506 per hour, less than what is being requested herein. See *Frye v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 21-22V, Slip Op, 58 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. April 15, 2024). I find no reason to deviate from such reasoned determination, and it otherwise is not the practice of OSM to adjust prior rate determinations upward in later cases. See *Jefferson v. Sec’y of Health & Hum. Servs.*, No. 19-1882V, 2023 WL 387051 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Jan. 9, 2023). Accordingly, I reduce Attorney Lorenz-Pignato’s 2024 hourly rate to be consistent with *Frye*. This results in a reduction in the amount of fees to be awarded of **\$180.20**.³

Furthermore, Petitioner has provided supporting documentation for all claimed costs. ECF No. 49-4. Respondent offered no specific objection to the rates or amounts sought. I find the requested costs reasonable and hereby award them in full.

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney’s fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Accordingly, I hereby GRANT in part, Petitioner’s Motion for attorney’s fees and costs. **I award a total of \$42,969.95 (representing \$42,237.80 in fees plus \$732.15 in costs) as a lump sum in the form of a check jointly payable to Petitioner and Petitioner’s counsel, Shannon Law Group, P.C.** In the absence of a timely-filed motion for review (see Appendix B to the Rules of the Court), the Clerk of Court shall enter judgment in accordance with this decision.⁴

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Brian H. Corcoran
Brian H. Corcoran
Chief Special Master

³ This amount consists of: $(\$523 - \$506 = \$17 \times 10.60 \text{ hrs.}) = \180.20 .

⁴ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.